

Pain and Joy in the New Year

What can we expect in the new year? We begin the new year with resolutions that we hope will somehow make expectations a little more predictable. But what is more predictable about the new year is the presence of pain and joy.

Christmas time was a time of joy in relationship with my family. There were many times afforded to me to gather with my family and experience the joys of our loving relationships. Rejoice with those who rejoice. One evening I was enjoying the relationship I have with some of my children and grandchildren when the phone rang. I answered and it was a church member informing me of the death of one of our other church members. Joy turned to pain. I listened and responded with grief and sorrow. I spent the next several hours on the phone listening and trying to comfort, and spreading the news of the pain to others in the church who could care for this family in their pain. Weep with those who weep.

Pain and joy go together in this life and they should be expected in your life and the life you share with others in the new year. The apostle Paul informs us of the pain and joy of the Christian life in his letter to the Romans. In chapter 8 he describes the pain we can expect in this way,

“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.” (Rom 8:22)

Paul uses the metaphor of childbirth to speak of the pain we suffer because of the various evils we encounter in this world. While we wait for the joy of the fullness of our salvation to be realized we experience pain. In the next verse Paul describes the Christian life as one of “groaning inwardly” (Rom.8:23). We can expect to experience pain in the new year, and this pain will cause us days and nights of groaning.

Recognizing this will help us to have correct expectations for the new year, but it will also enable us to help others who are experiencing pain. When we encounter a church member, a family member, or a neighbor experiencing pain we will not expect them to simply get over it. Child birth takes time. We can also see that we are able to know their pain through listening to their groaning. In the pain, we need to listen for what hurts so that we can patiently bear with another, understanding what is going on deep in their hearts. Listening to a person’s suffering is as important as encouraging a person in their suffering. We must be careful not to try and move someone past their pain too quickly. When my wife was giving birth to our six children, I could not tell her not to think about the pain, get over the pain, or even move past the pain. The pain had to be endured, but she needed someone by her bedside as she labored.

Yet as Paul talks about the pain he talks about the joy. The joy that is now and not yet,

“and not only creation but we, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Rom 8:23)

The Christian has received the Spirit of God. We have the joy of having God with us and in us for our joy in the midst of the pain. The Christian also has the certainty of adoption. In the pain we are the children of the living God. By faith in Jesus Christ, we can call out to God with the cry “Abba Father”. We also know for certain that our weak bodies that suffer pain throughout, in the whole of our beings, will one day be redeemed in Jesus. The joy we can expect now and in the future is in relationship to God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

It is a joy in relationship to God that shapes the pain in the present. It does not take the pain away, but it mixes the pain with a joy that circumstances and situations are subservient to. And this pain shapes the beauty of the joy. When beauty is seen through pain, it is seen differently. The joy may be a wintery one. A joy that sheds tears and sees not superficially but deeply. This is what we can expect, and this is what we can encourage and lead others to expect by faith through Jesus Christ.

Orthodoxy - Judgment

New City Catechism Question 18: Will God allow our disobedience and idolatry to go unpunished?

Answer: No, every sin is against the sovereignty, holiness, and goodness of God, and against his righteous law, and God is righteously angry with our sins and will punish them in his just judgment both in this life, and in the life to come.

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. - Ephesians 5:5-6

Payday is coming. Some people live to work for this promise fulfilled. They work and get what they deserve for their work, fair pay. They work all week or all month and their work does not go unnoticed, and in the end they are rewarded for their efforts. Our lives are somewhat like this in relationship to God. We live in sin and idolatry, and get what we deserve, misery and death. Paul says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men," (Romans 1:18), and "For the wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23)

God is righteous, holy, and good. Therefore, he must punish sin in this life and in an eternal death. Sometimes we want to make a god that is nice to us in our badness. We mold and shape a god who will not condemn our sin, let us continue to worship and serve the creature and creation, and give us a safe passage to heaven. But this is not the God who reveals himself in the Bible. There is not an escape for this death sentence by any good that we do. All man's good works are as "filthy rags" before the righteous and holy God. Therefore, "God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world." (Acts 17:31). There is a day that is fixed, a day of perfect fairness, and this day will be a day of absolute and final judgment.

This is as uncomfortable to write about as it is to read about. But it is true and necessary if we are to ever understand and experience how great God's love is for us in Jesus Christ. Our sin is far greater than we can ever think or imagine and it deserves a judgment that is unfathomable. But God's grace and love in Jesus Christ is deeper and higher, and longer and wider than we can trace out, but we should try. Here it is simply stated:

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (judgment), and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (love)," (Romans 3:23-24).

"but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners (judgment), Christ died for us (love)." (Romans 5:8).

"For the wages of sin is death (judgment), but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (love)." (Romans 6:23)

The Bible that tells us the truth of God's righteousness, our unrighteousness, and God's just judgment of sin, also tells us the truth of God's grace and love to rescue sinners from his judgment. It tells us of the loving gift of his only Son who lived a righteous life, died a sinless death as a substitute for us, and was raised from the dead for our justification. This is why Jesus' disciples preached God's wrath along with God's grace in Jesus Christ.